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In Search of Loss Time

Evelyn Deshane

1.

When I first met Noah, I was blindfolded.

My sister Julia wanted a baby shower for her first kid (a speck on a sonogram that she'd nicknamed peanut, then a boy she'd refer to as Charles--not Charlie or Chuck, but Charles). On a Saturday afternoon in the middle of rainy April, all the women were supposed to go to the living room of the house she shared with her husband, while all the men were supposed to go to Kevin's mother-in-law's place.

I opened the pink envelope and wanted to tear it apart.

"Why the separation?" I asked, over tea once I was calm. "Surely, you don't want Kevin to get out of diaper duty because he's a guy?"

"No, not at all. That's why he has his own party when normally men don't have baby showers. There are things that only women know how to talk about, though. Like the epidural, post-partum depression, and the bleeding that apparently doesn't end until like six weeks after birth. Did you know about that? Jesus. The things we don't know. So I want as many women there as possible." Julia ran a hand through her long, golden brown curls. Her hair was lush with pregnancy

hormones. When we were fourteen and fifteen, people thought we were twins. Now at twenty-nine and thirty, my hair barely got past an inch and no one mistook us for twins anymore.

Yet, two weeks later, here I was in the middle of a sea of chatter about how vaginas made us all more women.

When the baby food taste testing came around, I was first to volunteer to sit in the middle of the room with a black tie over my eyes as my sister and her best friends from grad school fed me bits from baby food jars and I guessed what I was tasting.

"Cream of corn?"

"No, try again."

"Okay ... Squash."

"Good. Okay, this one is hard."

My sister's voice faded away and a new presence stepped beside me. Strong presence. Stiff jeans I felt against my wrist. The person spoon fed me something that tasted like cranberries—then dropped it down my shirt.

"Shit." The voice was panicked, thinned. "Shit, I'm sorry."

"It's okay." I stood from the chair, reaching out to grab the stranger's arm. The stranger held back. "Can you take me to the kitchen?"

"Yes, yes."

My sister didn't say a thing as the new person led me aside. The crack of baby food lids sounded like the drumbeats to a song I wasn't privy to, now on the other side of the kitchen door.

I was relieved to be away from the crowd, but I still couldn't see. The cranberry mess fell between my bound breasts and caught on the ace bandages. My left arm was also covered in something wet and sticky, trailing between my fingers.

"Hey. You still here?"

"Yeah. Sorry ... I-uh—"

"I'm going to need you to take off the blindfold."

"Oh. Of course. Shit."

Then I saw him. Noah's green eyes were framed by dark hair, cut short to the sides. His *Planet of the Apes* T-shirt was accentuated with a jean jacket and dark skinny jeans that clung to his thin legs. Under the harsh lights of the kitchen, his barely-there stubble was visible; the straggling kind that came in when a person first started testosterone. His voice was hinged with the same dry pitch that most trans men had the first few months as they spoke "this is my voice [x] months on t" into cameras for a YouTube audience. Noah was so familiar in that moment I'd worried that I'd watched his YouTube videos late at night in my one-bedroom apartment and I already knew too much about him.

"Shit," he said again. His favourite word. He directed my hand to the sink and started to clear away the baby food under the hum of water.

"Was it cranberry?"

"Hmm?"

"The food. I think it was cranberry. But I'm not good at this."

"I'm not either, apparently. It was blueberry jam. Whatever that means."

"Well, we can be failures in the kitchen together, then."

His eye caught mine. He introduced himself to me, saying his name with a certain staccato rhythm. "I came with my sister," he explained next. "Natalie."

"And I came with mine. Julia."

"And you are ...?"

"Chris," I said before he could say my full name. "Just Chris."

"Nice to meet you. I don't think we can get the blueberry out of your shirt, though."

I glanced down at my bound breasts and skin, realizing he didn't want to try and clean that area of me. Instead of telling him to do it, I went upstairs and got a new shirt from my sister. The only thing she had that wasn't professional ware was her old campus shirt, two sizes too big for me. When I came back downstairs, Noah was still waiting for me in the kitchen, his hands nervous and fidgeting all the time.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he said. "I'm nervous and don't really want to go back out there. They ... they all think I'm a woman and it flusters me. Frustrates me. So I drop stuff everywhere."

"It's okay," I said. "I understand. They think I'm a woman too."

2.

“You’ve met me at a very strange time in my life.”

Noah held his laundry basket to his chest as he pushed open the laundry mat door for me. The inside was overrun with the smell of detergent and cigarettes, like half the room had been divided by scent. The red and orange chairs at the front, along with the *Cosmo* magazines from the 1990s, made whatever small date we were having feel like we were stepping back in time.

Noah plopped his laundry down on the first free machine. His off-white binders lined the top of his laundry. He dropped them into the machine as if they were shameful, followed by the black T-shirts he wore overtop of them for more than twelve hours at a time.

“You’re not supposed to do that,” I told him, when he’d confessed how long he’d worn them the week before. “It’s going to cut off your circulation.”

“Says Mixer Ace Bandage.”

I shrugged. “I only did that at the party. And only for an hour.”

“Whatever. You’re not like me in that regard. You can get away with an hour.”

“And you’re so special because ...?”

“I told you: you’ve met me at a very strange time in my life.”

“And I ignored your *Fight Club* references because all times in our lives are strange. All parts of our lives our strange. Just like our laundry.”

Noah pulled out a sports bra, panties

he wore when (and if) he got his period, and tried to hide them under the Batman and other superhero boxers, the men’s slacks, and a dozen men’s collared shirts. His skinny jeans were his one weakness, the one area where he shopped in the women’s section and didn’t care if he looked out of place. He turned each one of his T-shirts inside out so the printed logo or band or *Planet of the Apes* didn’t fade too much with wear in the wash.

Noah’s “strange time” in his life was the waiting period after applying for surgery. We lived in Ottawa, a four hour drive from the gender clinic in Toronto. Every other Sunday, he’d been driving down and staying with another trans friend named Malcolm so he could see those doctors, get his shots, and try to do the right gender song-and-dance routine to a community of experts who approved surgeries. The Sunday we met, he shouldn’t have been at the party with my sister’s friends, but in downtown Toronto, but all the forms were filled out and filed away. He only had to wait now and instead of staring at the wall in his small apartment, his sister had dragged him to the taste test.

The waiting part was the hardest on Noah, making him jumpy at each phone call and each email. It would take at least six months for the forms for a mastectomy to go through; and until then, his prescription for testosterone was transferred to our local doctor. If not for the baby shower, I was certain we would have met again in the doctor’s office, equally blindfolded and uncomfortable, except we may not have spoken.

I was glad we were speaking, even if he was always quoting pop culture as a way to deal with his feelings.

Noah dug his hands in his pockets and pulled out several rolls of quarters and loonies. They clanked against the machine as he put them inside and twisted it to start. The hum of the washing machine sounded over the traffic outside. Noah held his empty laundry basket over his chest. He was washing his binders and only had his emergency super-tight sports bra to cover himself. Somehow, it never seemed enough.

“I need that fucking surgery,” he muttered.

“I need the fucking world to change.”

He nodded, sympathetic. “No one understands what’s in between. I knew a person once, who applied for the surgery as non-binary. The council denied the orchiectomy the person wanted because they weren’t going from one point to another. So the person just did it themselves. Come into the ER like that, and they gotta treat you.”

“I’m not that desperate.”

“It’s not about desperation. It’s about love.”

“What now?”

“It’s about love,” he repeated. We headed to the orange and red chairs and sat down. Noah didn’t remove the basket from his lap, in front of his chest. I thought he was reading from the scattered *Cosmo* headlines about love until he spoke again. “This person couldn’t move on until they could love their body. And after they got their DIY surgery, they were fine. Better. So how can

we love someone else without loving ourselves first? It’s impossible.”

“I think that still depends on the world we’re living in. We shouldn’t exist, so it’s hard to find examples of love. If we just love one another and find ways of doing that, then maybe our world will change.”

Noah shrugged. “I don’t know. You and I want very different things.”

I sighed. I never wanted surgery. I never wanted hormones, either, really since without them bones turned to dust and broke at the slightest provocation. I wasn’t ready for osteoporosis at twenty-nine.

But I was ready for love.

When Noah’s laundry was done, and we had exhausted our extensive discussion about the merits of Brad Pitt’s films, we gathered up his clothing without bothering to fold it and carted it to his one bedroom apart a block away. There, in front of *Fight Club* on his laptop, we folded everything over pizza.

The ending scene rolled by and I watched as Noah’s lips said the same words Edward Norton’s character did in the movie.

Then I tried to kiss Noah. And to my surprise, he kissed me back.

Our soft, hesitant kiss became more forceful and soon became making out. When I tried to touch Noah’s chest, he pulled away.

“No. Not right now. It’s not the right time.”

“When will be the right time?”

“I ... I don’t know.”

“You know, we don’t have to do it the

way TV tells us. I don't have to touch your chest. You don't have to touch mine. We don't have to pretend to be gay men or a straight couple or whatever."

"Then what are we?"

In love? I thought, but remained silent. I wanted to kiss him again. When I did, Noah kissed back. He always kissed back, but always pulled away before our clothing came off. "No, no. Not now. Not now. It's never the right time."

The next Sunday, we went to the laundromat and folded clothing at my apartment, watching *Mr. And Mrs. Smith* instead of *Fight Club*. We made out again and, like clockwork, Noah pulled away. "No, no, never the right time. I can't love you until I love myself."

"More garbage from the TV. We don't have to be like that at all. I'm not Marla. I'm not Mrs. Smith. I'm not—anyone."

"You have to be someone. You have to choose."

"No, I don't."

"The absence of choice is a choice, Chris. You may not feel cis, but you'll always seem it."

"Shut the fuck up," I said. "This is my choice. I'm nothing and no one and everything in between."

Noah stopped pushing then. Our gaze fell on the space between our bodies. Different bodies, different landscapes, different strange times in our lives. While Noah's time was coming to an end, mine was never-ending, always in perpetuity; I'd never be normal.

"Let's watch another movie," Noah sug-

gested.

He put on *Fight Club*. Always fucking *Fight Club*. As the ending scene played over and over again, I knew that the first time we fought it would be about this—our bodies and our time in them and who served the worst sentence.

3.

The first time we fought, it was about music. Noah took me to a bar across the city that a friend of his was supposed to play at. His friend was drunk and sang shitty songs about women in mini-skirts. He couldn't play his instrument, and it was clear from Noah's wincing that he realized his friend was full of shit. When the set was over, Noah tried to hide at the back of the bar.

"I'm sorry I brought you here. It's really weird."

"I've seen stranger," I said. "There's a jukebox at the back, though. You have any more quarters?"

Noah dug into his pants and pulled out a roll of them, followed by a couple loonies. I took everything from his palm and sauntered to the back. The jukebox was genuine; I hadn't seen one since I was six or seven and my part-time father took me to a bar one of the weekends he was supposed to take care of me. As it turned out, it was one of the last weekends.

I slid the coins into the machine. Selected "Common People" by Pulp. When it didn't work, I slapped the red rim of the jukebox once or twice until it finally spit out the tune.

When I sat back at the bar with Noah, he

was talking to his drunk friend like he hadn't just shit-talked his performance the past forty minutes. He laughed and joked and carried on like I wasn't even there.

"What the hell is this shit?" Patrick said between sips of his beer. "I haven't heard this trash in ages."

"It's pretty awful, yeah," Noah said. "This is why jukeboxes shouldn't exist."

"But 'Common People' is a classic."

"Yeah, for Muzak in supermarkets. For here, though, it makes no sense. Who wants to be reminded of William Shatner's god-awful version of this song?" Patrick laughed as if it was the best joke. Noah followed him. When I shot Noah a look, a please defend me gaze, Noah turned away. He showed me his back as he focused on his piss drunk friend who I thought he'd been avoiding. So, when my song was over, I took my jacket and I left. Noah came by my apartment at two in the morning, asking to be let in with a slight drunk-drawl to his voice. He buzzed in again and again. I ignored him each and every time.

"Come on, don't play the silent game. I was just having fun. Patrick's a good guy, just a bad musician. You have good choice in music, though. Not my favourite era, but it's good."

When I didn't respond, he finally left. In the morning, he sent me a text message riddled with the mistakes of a man who didn't know his limit the night before.

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done or said any of that. I regret drinking but I just can't fucking stand thinking about the surgery forms when I'm sober. I regret taking you there. Not because I don't like going out with

you, but because when I see Patrick I feel like even more shit than I already do about the surgery. And that song, too—it's like I'm seven again and my dad is telling me that I shouldn't play with the boys. Because I'm not a boy. I used to sing that song in the shower and pretend to be a boy in a band, someone I wasn't, and sometimes it still feels like I'm pretending. Like a bad taste in my mouth after a hangover.

I said nothing. He wrote me back three hours later. *Also, I just hate the fucking music video.*

In two days, when my anger ebbed away, I looked at our text messages and marveled at our first fight. It wasn't about our bodies or our names or our pronouns. It was so wonderfully simple that I wanted to frame it.

Instead, I texted: *I only accept apologies in the form of cake.*

4.

Three days later, he brought a homemade vanilla bean cake thick with butter cream frosting.

"Only adults appreciate butter cream," he said as he put the dish on my counter. "I learned that a long time ago after looking after my sister's kid. Always make the cake from scratch, but the frosting is just sugar to kids. Buy that shit in a can."

"But for adults?"

"Adults will notice the difference between canned frosting and the real deal. So, if you want to impress them, use that butter cream." Noah smiled. I forgave him that instant because he wanted to impress me. He wanted to make

things right.

When he pulled out a shaker of rainbow sprinkles and candles from his jean jacket pocket, I knew I was in love with him.

“Oh my God. Why all this?”

“Is that a good ‘oh my God?’”

“Yes!” I grabbed the sprinkle can and poured some over the edges of the cake. Noah’s smile was large, genuine. I had never seen him like this before. *In love too?* I wanted him so badly, and I needed him to know it too. I kissed his cheek and turned his face to meet mine. He opened up to me like he always did, holding my sides and keeping his hands there and only there, like ten and two position on the steering wheel of a car.

“So why the candles?” I asked after we had pulled apart. The heavy scent of vanilla in the room made my stomach rumble, fighting off my desire for that second.

“It seemed appropriate. I know it’s not our birthday, but hey, who doesn’t like blowing out for wishes, right?”

So we put them all in the centre, every last one of them, until the cake seemed to be an Olympic torch. Noah hummed the baseline of the song we fought about, but I told him to stop.

“We both have to blow this out, okay?”

“Okay.”

On the count of three, we blew. Wax flew everywhere, mixing with the frosting and our skin.

“Ah, shit. Shit.” Noah tried to remove the wax from the cake. When it didn’t work, he opened his bag to grab some Kleenex. I saw a

book bigger than the bible at the base of it.

“What’s that?”

“What? Oh. That.” He put down the Kleenex and pulled the book with a dozen dog eared pages. “*Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust. It’s one of the longest books ever written.”

“What’s it about?”

“A lot of things. Mostly this guy’s life. It starts with him eating a madeleine cookie—basically a butter cookie from France—and the smell triggers memory. He goes back through all the events of his life and catalogues them.” Noah fanned through some of the sections he bookmarked, then shut the book and handed it over to me. “Seemed like a good thing to read while waiting for the doctors, you know? I’m almost halfway through it. Maybe by the time I get surgery, I’ll be done.”

I took the book from him and looked at the cover emblazoned with a cup of tea and a cookie. All so much fuss from a single dessert; a single smell of butter and vanilla. While I skimmed the pages, Noah cleaned up the mess we’d made of the candles. The butter cream and vanilla now smelled like the clean nothingness of wax and the burnt wick of the candles. *How will I remember this?* I wondered, flicking through the book. *How will Noah remember it?*

“The title,” I said after a moment.

“Hmm?” Noah shut off the water from washing his hands. “What about it?”

“It’s translated wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Noah squinted as I showed him the original French title of the

book, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, that I'd found in the first printing information. I'd grown bilingual while in Montréal and moved to Ottawa because it still used French as much as English while Noah had moved here when he was eighteen for school from Ontario. He'd picked up the French on the street signs and bilingual food labels, but still relied on his English mind.

"The title can also be '*In Search of Lost Time*,'" I explained to him. "The word *perdre* in French, where *perdu* from the original title comes from, means both 'lost' as in something that can't be found, but 'wasted' as if you were given something but didn't use it. So you miss both meanings when the title is in English and especially when the title is called *Remembrance of Things Past*. It's more than just time passing—it's time being lost and being wasted."

"Huh. I think I like *Remembrance* better, though. It's better to think I'm remembering things in the waiting room, rather than wasting them."

But you are wasting them, I wanted to shout. You can't even enjoy music anymore.

Instead, I folded the book and got us plates for the cake. Noah slid a knife through the sprinkled frosting, now clear of most of the wax. When he handed out the first slice, the fork on the plate slipped down and clattered on my apartment floor.

"Shit. Will nothing go right? Shit." Noah's voice was deeper now when he spoke his favourite word. I could see him growing, his stubble getting thicker, filling out in front of me. I wanted to see all of him so much in that mo-

ment.

"What do you look like naked?"

"What?" His cheeks reddened in a single breath. "What?"

"You heard me. What do you look like naked?"

He didn't answer for some time. Just when I thought he'd get up and leave, he asked, "What do you look like naked?"

"Not like you. Not like a woman. Not like anything. Do you want to see?"

He nodded, but just barely. We forgot about the cake. I took his hands and led him to the bedroom.

Our months of dancing around one another fell always with our clothing. He tried to hide his body, his thicker curves, but I focused on the parts he wanted me to see: the trail of hair between his nipples that led down to the dark patch above his mound, the coarse hair on his chin, his jaw line thick and hard muscles underneath, and his name on the back of my mouth.

"Noah, Noah, Noah." I said it like a psalm.

"Chris," he said. "Be ... gentle ... don't ..."

"I know. Not like TV."

I took his hand and told him where I wanted him to focus: my neck, my ears, the soft spot between the two, and the junction of my throat. He held my breasts, which weren't too scary to me as they were to him, and my thighs, already wet and slick. He shuddered as he touched me. He trembled next to me. When I didn't think he could take too much of my skin and my tattoos that were song lyrics he knew too

well, I bent down in front of him and took the lead.

The smell of him was thick, heady. Better than vanilla and butter cream on my tongue. Better than Brad Pitt or Edward Norton; the testosterone shots changed his body composition and made him into Noah and not just masculine. I brushed my hand along his thighs, spreading him and revelling in his body as he grew closer to his climax.

“On the bed,” he whimpered. “I can’t stand like this.”

So we moved, and I spread his legs so I could see his clit. He was longer than me and both hard and soft to the touch. The words clit and cock blended in my mind; Noah’s click became what I needed. I ran my fingers along him, inside of him, and tasted him with the flat of my tongue.

“I want to fuck you,” he said. He writhed beneath me.

“I want you to,” I said, breathy. “I am consenting fully.”

He laughed like music, like something I needed to hear. He kissed me as he rolled me over. I opened up to let him explore. He braced our sexes together, grinding into me, entering me in a new way. His thumb and tongue found my folds, separated them, and brought me closer—harder—faster—than before.

When I came, I heard and smelled and tasted everything at once. I felt everything at once. Everything—anything—as long as it was with him. His orgasm turned his voice into the grainy whisper that I’d seen without seeing his

true face. That I’d know in the dark and love in the dark, no matter what.

5.

Three months later, Noah was in my bed again, the incisions from his surgery hidden behind bandages. I helped him up to the bathroom every few hours and helped him with the drains. I made him soup, put on TV shows for him, and made sure he wasn’t alone.

He surprised me by not wanting to watch *Fight Club*. The strange time in his life was over—or maybe, it was only beginning.

“Come sit with me?” he asked on day three. The pills were wearing off. He was more alert and less in pain. I sat on the edge of his bed and he pulled me closer, towards his hip and his now flat (but still swollen) chest.

“Are you in pain?”

“No. But I wanted to show you something.” He opened his phone and went to an old album labeled ‘before 2000.’ Inside were a dozen pictures of a family at a table, a family at an amusement park, and a bunch of kids graduating from elementary school and performing plays. Little Noah. Noah before he was Noah. He started to tell me all the stories from his youth, the way vanilla cake smelled when his mother made them, and the many, many birthday parties that his family seemed to have at McDonalds.

“Do you want me to make you cake? Like you made for me?”

“No. I want you to be naked again.”

So I took off my clothing and got into

bed with him. He was only in bandages, his body now his own. His body now a home. He told me about his life, his hands on my hip, then breast, then my sex again and again.

And I was home.

6.

It's all the same story. Proust bites into a madeleine cookie and spends over a million words talking about his childhood as it rushes back to him like a film reel. Tyler Durden and the narrator become one person during a strange time in their lives. I meet Noah in the dark and we fight and fuck and fall in love over cake. We stay in bed together, in one another's arms, always in search of lost time.

Always in search of something not wasted, only shared, from here on in.